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ABSTRACT

A study examined repair sequences in talk between two German-English bilingual children and between parent and child within a nuclear family in which German is generally spoken. Data were drawn from tape recordings and developmental diaries kept on the two preschool children. Patterns of parent-child and child-child corrections were examined. In parent-child corrections it was found that the father, a native speaker of American English, corrected most often for negative transfer from one language to another, primarily Germanisms brought into English usage. In contrast, the native German-speaking mother corrected primarily the error types monolingual German children make, particularly inflections. Repair was made most often in the turn just following the discrepancy. In child-child corrections, the older child began correcting his sister at age four years, three months. At first, corrections focused on facts, then on language usage and style, and subsequently on interference. Later he turned to giving explanations or appropriate contexts for the repair. At just five years, he made his first syntactic correction. The younger child did not correct her brother during the study. Overall, the repair patterns parallel those found in other studies. (MSE)

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REPAIR IN A BILINGUAL FAMILY: THE PREFERENCE FOR OTHER-CORRECTION

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Introduction

This paper reports the results of my investigation of repair sequences in talk between two German-English bilingual children and their German and American parents. By repair I mean any verbal attempt to correct some apparent discrepancy in conversation. This includes cases where speakers correct themselves as well as where they correct others. Most of the work done on repair so far has focussed on interaction between adults with native speaker competence and approximately equal world knowledge (cf. Schegloff, Jefferson, and Sacks 1977). In that context, self-repair is the rule: Since only the current speaker knows the intended message, he or she naturally assumes full responsibility for repairs. Any error a fully competent speaker makes is viewed as a matter of inattentive performance, so no one else has any real occasion to produce a correction.

By contrast, interaction in the bilingual nuclear family I studied clearly favored other-correction from parent to child, and from the older child to the younger. This follows from the asymmetrical distribution of competence and knowledge generally among the interlocutors. Since children are still acquiring the language appropriate to many contexts, linguistic discrepancies are bound to arise. And parents naturally feel obliged to help their children produce what they feel are appropriate utterances. The bilingual setting not only doubles the number of structures and contexts to be

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coordinated, but also brings with it the potential for interference between the two systems. Again parents want to guide their children in sorting the two languages into separate sets of linguistic habits each congruent within itself. So repair sequences like the one below occur routinely.

(1) Father : Why do I have to put it there?[1]
Coco (2;10) : *Why* - it's red. (cf. German *Weil es rot ist)*
Father : *Because it's red?*
Coco : *Yeah.*

The error in this first passage arises due to the girl's confusion of the German subordinating conjunction weil with the phonetically similar English question word *why*, so that she ends up with *why* in answers where she ought to have *because*. The mix-up introduces the kind of discrepancy which regularly calls forth a repair sequence. Formulation of the correct construction with question intonation signals to the girl that she must complete the sequence. She responds appropriately to the pedagogical pattern with an affirmative *yeah* in the third turn to demonstrate understanding. Repair sequences like this make up the central concern of the analysis to come. In particular, I will be comparing different correction patterns, and noting their correlations both with assumptions about the child's evolving competence and with types of interference in each case.

My data, including the example just cited, consist of some twelve hours of audio tape recordings made of my own family at home over a space of nine months along with developmental diaries I keep on the two

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[1] This and all other examples are transcriptions from my own recordings. Children's ages by years; months appear in parentheses. I follow regular orthographic conventions, and make no attempt to imitate the children's simplifications and elisions. Italics are used throughout to identify the repairable item or construction in cited passages.

children, Nick and Corinna (Coco), who were four years, three months, and two years, seven months respectively at the beginning of the taping period. Both are acquiring German and English in fairly balanced fashion with some preference for German. Their mother is a native German speaker; I am a native speaker of American English, who has spent about thirteen years teaching and living in Germany. We usually speak German among ourselves, and English with almost everyone else. I always knew when the recorder was running, though the other family members were usually unaware of it; and I had no intention of investigating repair sequences till late in the recording period.

Parent-child correction

During the early part of the recording period, errors caused by negative transfer accounted for just over half or 52.5% (23 of 44) of all my corrections on both children's utterances. This probably reflects the children's proclivity for transporting Germanisms into their English as well as my past experience in teaching English to speakers of other languages. Most obvious among these interferences are cases where a child imported a lexeme from German into a context framed in English as in my second example.

(2) Father : Is it a butterfly?
Coco (2;10) : No. It *snecke, snecke.* (cf. German *Schnecke)*
Father : You mean a snail?
Coco : Yeah. It's a snail.

This example illustrates a second possible correction pattern. Here I preface the correction with *you mean,* but the intended effect remains the same: I want to draw Coco's attention to the mix-up, and to have her respond in a way which shows her understanding of the problem,

which she does not only by repeating my correction, but also by rendering everything into a complete English construction.

As the third citation shows, a child may also expropriate a syntactic pattern from one language for use with lexemes from the other.

(3) Coco (2;10) : *Make* these flowers *here-in.*
(cf. German: *Mach diese Blumen hierein)*
Father : Put 'em in here.
Coco : Yeah.

At this age, Corinna had entirely adopted this German pattern for use in English. Instead of initiating repair with a question, I simply produce the corresponding English structure. I hoped counterposition of the two constructions would increase her awareness, and help her sort them out. In fact, as I write this, Corinna is three years, three months old, and still has not stopped transferring the *hierein* construction, let alone using *make* for *put*.

By contrast with me, the children's mother concentrates her corrections on the sorts of errors monolingual German children make, in particular inflections. Of her total twenty-two corrections of both children's talk, only five or about 23% focus on interferences. This follows in part from the fact that the children nearly always speak German with their mother, that they control German better than English, and, hence, that their German suffers far less interference from English than conversely, but it may also reflect my wife's past experience as a teacher of German to native speaker children. Even when she has corrected interferences, all but one case involved use of an English word in a German construction as in the passage cited below.

(4) [Coco (2;11) on swings]
Coco : Mami, ich geh' *crooked*.
Mother : Schief?
Coco : Ja.

The question intonation here may indicate a presupposition that Coco already controls the German form *schief*, and so should produce it herself, or it may just serve to signal that her mother expects some response. More typical of her corrections are the following two examples involving case inflections in personal pronouns.

(5) Coco (2;10) : Aber du kannst mit *mich* spielen.
But you can with me (accusative) play
Mother : Mit mir spielen nur.
With me (dative) play only
Coco : Mir spielen. Okay.

The complete correction here assumes that Corinna does not yet control the dative form, while the slot left open for her older brother in the next passage presupposes at least rudimentary competence.

(6) Nick (4;8) : Mami, ich will mit *dich*.
Mommy, I want to (go) with you (accusative)
Mother : Mit?
With?
Nick : Dir.
You (dative)

The failure to correctly assign accusative and dative forms of the second person singular familiar personal pronoun might be viewed as an interference from English, which lacks the distinction entirely, but it is certainly common enough among monolingual German children to count as a normal monolingual error.

In summary, repair sequences in interaction between parents and children in a bilingual family show a preference for other-correction by the parents in the turn immediately following some discrepancy. Parents do not usually interrupt ongoing utterances, but rather allow the child to finish before initiating repair. If a parent judges the

correction to be within the child's competence, he or she may initiate repair with a partial repeat leaving an open slot for the child to fill in. In areas the child may not yet control, parents initiate repair with a question or a suggested replacement for the offending item. Even the suggestion may bear question intonation to signal the expectation of a response by the child. When the parent presupposes no awareness of the proper form, he or she simply produces a complete correction for the child.

Notwithstanding the bilingual context and our pedagogical proclivities, the sorts of corrections my wife and I produced seem to parallel those described elsewhere for care-givers interacting with monolingual children (cf. Newport, Gleitman, and Gleitman 1977; Cross 1977; Howe 1981; Rondal 1985; but also Leopold 1949 for data on bilingual children). So parent-child interaction affords us a clear illustration of the structural preference for other-correction in repair sequences, namely for parental correction of children's defective utterances in the immediately following turn. Whether children are acquiring one language or more, parents must have a pretty good idea of their current abilities to produce appropriately differentiated feedback on errors. Obviously, the asymmetrical distribution of competence in favor of adults along with their pedagogical urges vis-a-vis their children are necessary prerequisites for this organization of repair. So the interpersonal relationship between speakers and their goals in an interaction determine the preference structure of repair, rather than some neutral structure or principles independent of context.

Child-child correction

On the developmental side, which I can only sketch here, Nick began to other-correct his younger sister when he was four years, three months old. At first the corrections focussed on factual errors, but in a short time they turned to language itself. In the first metalinguistic repair sequence I have on tape, Nick produces what amounts to a stylistic correction on Corinna's clumsy *Fußgängerleute* (pedestrian-people).

(7) Coco (2;7) : Ich hab' Fußgängerleute gemacht - da.
I have pedestrian-people made - there
Nick (4;3) : Corinna, du kannst auch Menschen sagen.
Corinna, you can also people/humans say
Coco : Menschen.

At play together, the two children occasionally move from German to English and back for various reasons, but the mid-turn switch in the next passage lacks any apparent motivation, so the correction presumably aims to instruct the younger sibling in her separation of the two languages. At the same time, this passage represents Nicky's first correction for interference in Corinna's speech.

(8) Nick (4;7) : Mach schnell.
Do (it) fast
Coco (2;10) : Ich mach' *slow*.
I do (it) *slow*
Nick : Nee, Coco, *slow* ist ganz langsam.
No Coco *slow* is real slow
Coco : Ich mache langsam.
I do (it) slow

Just a week later, I overheard the following exchange in which Nicky corrected Corinna's use of German *Eimer* 'can, pail' to *truck* primarily for the sake of their listening monolingual grandparents, since he knows she uses both *garbage can* and *Mülleimer* incorrectly for the corresponding vehicle.

(9) Coco (2;10) : Here comes the garbage *Eimer*.
Nick (4;7) : Nee, garbage truck.
Coco : Garbage truck.

Here, as in most of his corrections during the taping period, Nicky repeats the relevant construction as far as necessary with his replacement contrastively stressed. Negation with *nee, nein* or *no* and/or Corinna's name preface his corrections much of the time. Nick never uses question intonation, forms an interrogative with *you mean* or leaves a slot to be filled in his corrections, although he regularly hears his parents do so, as we have seen.

As he neared age five, Nick began to produce corrections with an eye to explanation, perhaps because he felt his little sister was simply taking too long to sort out the two languages by herself. So in the passage below he not only replaces the offending word in the German construction, but first constructs the appropriate English environment for the word.

(10) Nick (4;11) : Wieviel hast du?
How many have you?
Coco (3;3) : Ich hab' zero.
I have *zero*
Nick : Nein, Coco, du mußt sagen: I have zero.
No Coco you have to say: I have zero.
Oder du kannst sagen: Ich hab' null.
Or you can say: I have none

Finally, just three days before his fifth birthday, Nicky produced what one might consider his first correction for syntactic interference. He replaces only one word in the passage below, but he clearly shows his grasp of the English construction *put something on* as a whole in contrast with German *mach was an*. In the car on the way to playschool with an English-speaking playmate, Coco wanted me to turn the air conditioning up and said:

(11) Coco (3;4) : Daddy, *make* high on.
Nick (5;0) : It's put high on in English.
Coco : Put high on.

Corinna has yet to attempt a correction on Nicky's speech. Among preschool siblings the same preference structure for repair holds as between parent and child: The more competent speaker takes responsibility for whatever corrections he or she deems necessary. Clark (1978) confirms that children around age four comment on language errors, especially those of younger siblings, sometimes offering corrections. Iwamura (1980) notes considerable correction activity between two playmates around three, then later around three and a half. McTear (1985) reports that other-corrections were infrequent between the two girls he investigated intermittently from 3;8 and 4;0 to 5;5 and 5;9 respectively, though he reproduces several interesting examples. Preschoolers show no polite avoidance of other-correction when they think they hear an error, nor do they hedge or deeply embed their corrections to signal reluctance; so even where other-correction occurs only sporadically, it is not a dispreferred activity. Apparently, then, a four-year-old or even a younger child can possess sufficient pedagogical motivation and linguistic awareness to other-correct a younger sibling regularly. These corrections may either echo the ones received from parents by the child or they may represent his or her own attempts to work out patterns for repairing talk. But either way, they offer a natural window on the child's developing competence and linguistic awareness. Moreover, they provide a second illustration beyond parent-child interaction of a setting which favors other-corrections for interpersonal reasons.

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